

A Test of true and false Doctrines.

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S E R M O N

P R E A C H E D

In the P A R I S H C H U R C H

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S T. C H A D, S A L O P;

On S E P T E M B E R 24, 1769.

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P R E F A C E.

THE following discourse was occasioned by a sermon preached in my church, so contrary to the sentiments of religion, which I wish to imprint and am always inculcating on the minds of my hearers, that I thought myself obliged on the first opportunity to give my testimony against it. The preacher is a person of known learning, and, as I am informed, a principal leader among those who are called methodists. The particular tenets which gave this offence, and the rash, unguarded terms in which they were expressed, I forbear to mention. They are too well remembered by many of

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of those who heard them : and it is probable that this discourse will fall into the hands of few others. It is now published at the request of many, not with a view to inflame the minds of angry and contentious men, or to kindle an unchristian spirit of strife and bitterness against the teachers of these doctrines. On the contrary, there is no one, as all who know me will testify, more forward than I have ever been, to do justice to their good intentions ; to the piety and other virtues of those who patronize them ; and even to the exemplary zeal in their parochial duties of many of their pastors : no one, as all who hear me will testify, more careful to inculcate the duties of candour and forbearance, and the most extensive charity to those who differ in opinion from us. But when the first principles of religion seem to be

deserted

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deserted, and the first duties of it superseded as fruitless and unnecessary, when the goodness and moral attributes of the deity are indirectly arraigned, and this with an undoubting confidence, and an air imperious and decisive, tending to blind the minds and surprize the credulity of the vulgar ; to which I have more than once been an ear-witness in my own church : it cannot be unbecoming me to warn those with whom I am concerned, against being deceived with vain words,—against hastily believing that their own pastor is a setter forth of false doctrines, and preaches another gospel instead of that of Christ, when he teaches them as he always does, that religion is designed to enforce the practice of piety and all good works, and that the end of all its doctrines and institutions, as well as of its precepts is holiness of life. With this intention I put this discourse into their

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their hands, which in many parts of it has no immediate reference to the sermon that occasioned it, but to other doctrines that are supposed to stand connected in the same system with it ; and in which some of the boldest assertions there advanced are for the reason above-hinted over-looked. The little time that could be had for preparing it, will excuse the want of accuracy and method that will be observed in it. As this could not be redressed without new modelling the whole, it is here printed with very little amendment, just as it was preached.

I JOHN iv. 1.

*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the
spirits whether they are of God.*

IT is remarkable, that from the first establishment of christianity, even in the times of the apostles themselves, it should be thought necessary to caution men against false teachers and seducing spirits, who corrupted the sincere milk of the word, and led men astray from the ways of truth and godliness.

No sooner were the epistles of St. Paul transcribed and read in the churches than over-~~curious~~^{curious} and speculative men put their own comments upon them, and made them speak doctrines contrary to the mind of the apostle and to true religion : *in which*

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epistles of our beloved Paul, saith St. Peter §, there are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. It was probably some hasty and erroneous conclusions drawn from hence, which St. James sets himself to confute in his general epistle : in which he cautions his readers against entertaining too high an opinion of the efficacy of virtue of faith ; as if it were necessarily productive of obedience, or could make any compensation for the want of obedience. *My brethren, saith he ‡, what doth it profit a man say I have faith without works ? Can faith save him ? Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.*

Men have ever been fond of placing their religion in opinions more than in practice, of dividing into sects and parties, saying I am of Paul, I am of Apollos and I of Cephas, employing their zeal about matters of little moment and of doubtful

§ 2 Pet. iii. 16. ‡ James ii. 14, 18.

disputation

disputation, instead of applying the great and plain truths of the gospel, to the amendment of their lives and purification of their hearts. Hence the kingdom of Christ is divided against itself. Scripture and authority are pleaded for contradictory opinions, and where these are found insufficient, the witness of the spirit is sometimes presumptuously called in, and immediate inspiration or illumination from heaven indirectly, if not openly, challenged to authorize doctrines that are a reproach to reason as well as christianity.

Our Lord therefore early forewarned his followers to beware of false teachers and pretended prophets who should come in his name. And the apostle in the text admonishes us not to believe every pretence to revelation, or to a commission from heaven, but to try the spirits whether they are of God, and have a well-grounded claim to his authority.

An excellent and plain rule for judging of the truth and importance of religious

doctrines, as well as of the danger and different degrees of malignity in error, and which is yet of more consequence to us, of our own proficiency in religious duties, I have lately laid before you in the words of our blessed Saviour †, *By their fruits ye shall know them.*

There is yet another test by which we may try religious opinions, as extensive in its use and as easy in the application, which is by comparing them with the great leading principles of religion, such as are universally acknowledged to be essential and fundamental to it.

In religion, as in all other parts of knowledge, there are some first allowed truths, from which there lies no appeal, which are either implied in the very idea of religion, or are however every where acknowledged and received for true ; which want no argument to inforce them, and can scarce by any argument be made clearer or plainer than they are. Such are these

† Matt. vii: 16.

that

that follow ; that God is the righteous governor of the world ; that he loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity ; that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him, and that he will not let the guilty go free—that man is endowed with a faculty of understanding to discern betwixt good and evil, and with a will or power to chuse or refuse the evil or the good—that he is the creature of God, and accountable to him for the use of those faculties or powers, and obliged to exert them in a right manner towards God and himself as well as his neighbour ; in a word, that he is obliged, as he tenders the favour of his maker and judge, to practice what is good and to avoid what is evil.

These are truths which shine by their own light, which are every where supposed, and often appealed to in the scriptures, and without which no religion that deserves to be called rational, can be supposed to exist. These principles, whatever else we may doubt about, must remain undisputed. They cannot, without

out shaking the foundations of religion itself, be brought in question. They are indeed the very reason and meaning of all religion, without which it would be a vain and senseless thing. These then are a standard or test, by which we may in many cases determine about religious opinions, and discover the error and malignity of false doctrines. Truth is always uniform, and every truth consistent with every other. In other words, whatever contradicts a known truth must be false. Now the truths we have here laid down are such, as it requires no learning or superior knowledge to comprehend ; they are obvious to every capacity, and convincing to every understanding. Men may darken counsel by words without knowledge, may obscure the brightest truths by sophistry and words without meaning, but if we confront their reasonings with, or weigh them in the balance against these momentous and self-evident truths, their vanity and emptiness will readily appear. They may find difficult texts of scripture, which when taken by themselves

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may be made to sound in favour of the strangest doctrines : but be assured, that the sense of these, when taken in connection with the whole, will ever be found agreeable to the truths before us ; because God cannot deny himself, nor his word and his will be at variance with his attributes, and with the plain dictates of conscience, which is the voice of God within us.

To the truth of these first principles, I cannot doubt the assent of every one who hears me. To assist you in the application of them, or rather to shew that you can want no assistance but the exercise of your own reason, I shall point out the use of them in some particular instances.

First then, if we are told that the law of God is so pure and perfect, that we cannot with our best endeavours equal it in practice, but must in very many instances fall short of it ; and, at the same time, that nothing but universal and unremitting obedience will be accepted at his

his hands ; that the least sins of the least of his creatures are of infinite guilt in his sight ; that no amends can be made or pardon obtained for any sins that are past, by repentance and a better obedience for the future ; that God has no mercy but in consequence of the mediation and intercession of Christ † : this is plainly representing God as an hard task master, reaping where he hath not sown, and gathering where he hath not strewed ; as requiring more from us than he hath given us power to perform ; and is contrary to all the principles we have laid down.

The law of God does not indeed allow of any dispensation for sin of any kind or degree. It would be a contradiction in terms to suppose this. For what is sin but the transgression of the law ? and the law cannot certainly permit the transgression of itself. But the righteousness of God, as governor of the

† Some of the least ~~exceptionable~~ passages in the sermon which gave occasion to this, were the following : *There are no little sins. To have little sins you must have a little God. God bath no mercy but through Christ the redeemer.*

world, implies that he is gracious and merciful as well as just : that his subjects are sufficiently indulged and encouraged ; that merciful allowances will be made for the unavoidable infirmities of our nature ; and that even for greater crimes upon our sincere repentance and amendment we shall be forgiven, and in some degree restored to favour. This is the voice of reason and equity. And it is the voice of scripture too. For what saith the old testament ? *God will not be extreme to mark what is done amiss. He knoweth whereof we are made, and remembreth that we are but' dust**. *Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and turn unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and unto our God for he will abundantly pardon*†. And what saith the new ? *Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out*||. *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*§. This is clear and

* Psalm cxxx. iii. ciii. 14. † Isai. lv. 7. || Acts iii. 19.
§ 1 John i. 9.

precise, and the contrary tenets which admit no alleviation of sin in any case, or of pardon upon repentance, are plainly repugnant to scripture as well as reason, and to that mercy and goodness, which by both we are taught to ascribe to the divine being.

It is certain that the pardon of sin, tendered as it is by the gospel to the greatest sinners upon their faith and repentance, and including, as it always does, not only a remission of the penalty due to it, but all that latitude of grace and favour which is implied in the christian salvation, that is a restoring the penitent to the hopes of heaven and immortality, is always represented in the writings of the apostles, as procured for us by the merits of Christ. But this whole dispensation, the redemption of the world by Christ, is itself ascribed to the original goodness and love of God to mankind, as its moving cause. The language of scripture is, *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son* *. *In this was ma-*

John iii. 16.

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nifested the love of God towards us, that he sent his only begotten son into the world †. He was made to us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption †. The language of our blessed Lord is, that he was sent, appointed of God, that he came not to do his own will, but the will of his father which sent him. Who then shall tell us, that God hath forgotten to be gracious, and hath shut up his loving kindness in displeasure ?

Next, if we are taught that good works are of no account, and that our best obedience will avail us nothing in the sight of God ; this is contrary to all the principles we have laid down, destroys all the notions we have of God's moral government of the world, and reduces religion, as we shall presently see, to a system of mystery and speculation only, rather than a rule of life and conduct.

It is certain that our best works can give us no claim of right on the justice

† 1 John iv. 9. † 1 Cor. i. 30.

God. We have already received more at his hands than all our services can repay. Our works and obedience have no merit of this kind. But if God has any mercy, grace, or favour for his creatures, and it is surely impious to doubt this, it must be obedience, a right conduct, in other words, righteousness and holiness of life, which recommends us to his favour. The sinner cannot be as the righteous in his sight. The great end of government is to secure obedience in the subject, and the only title to favour in the subject must be obedience to the governing power. We cannot so much as suppose any covenant between God and man, but this must be the condition on the part of man. Accordingly we are every where told, that *God will judge every man according to his works* *—*that they that have done good shall go into life eternal, and they that have done evil into everlasting punishment.* †

But here another part of the system I mentioned comes in aid of this doctrine. It will be said that faith is the substitute
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* Rom. 2. 6.

† Math. 25. 46.

of good works, and the only stipulated condition of acceptance with God, and that we are expressly told by St. Paul, that *we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law* §. This is one of the passages of scripture, which as I have above said, are frequently abused to a sense quite foreign to the truth. By faith is here plainly meant, embracing the gospel, and the justification mentioned, has no respect, nor can with propriety be applied to the present state of christians, but to those only who had lately embraced the gospel, who had been converted from Jews and Gentiles, and become Christians. These on their receiving the gospel, or professing their faith in Christ, were admitted to a pardon for all their past sins, which is the thing meant by justification, and was significantly represented to them by baptism, which denoted the washing away of sin. They were admitted to a new state of trial and probation by the grace and favour of God, not for any works or merit of

§ Rom. iii. 28.

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their own : But were undoubtedly expected from that time, and are every where in scripture called upon to lead holy and christian lives, and to be fruitful in every good word and work, without which they could never hope to be finally pardoned, justified, or saved.

Obedience to God must, as I said, be the condition upon which his promises are suspended. This obedience in its principle, as it resides in the hidden man of the heart, which is what will be judged by God the searcher of hearts, and to which we must look for the real character of the man ; obedience, I say, in its principle, is a total resignation of the man, of his will and affections to the will and law of God. In its effects it includes both faith and good works : leading us to rely with absolute security on God's truth and faithfulness—to believe that what he hath promised he is able also to perform ; to submit our understanding to his truth, how mysterious soever it may appear

appear ; and to commit our souls unto him in well-doing as unto a merciful creator ; expecting his mercies declared in Christ Jesus, how unmerited soever, how incomprehensible soever, and wrapped up from our knowledge in the darkness of futurity. And thus is the virtue of faith, in its whole extent, included in obedience, and derives all its value in the sight of God from the principle I have mentioned.

But we are not yet got far enough in this labyrinth of error. We shall next be told, that we are utterly incapable of performing any good works ; that the best works of the best of men are stained with sin ; that our nature is so impaired and corrupted by the fall of our first parents, that we have no power or will to refuse the evil and chuse the good, much less to produce any acceptable fruits of righteousness ; that notwithstanding all the warnings of conscience and the calls of God to repentance, notwithstanding all his promises, threatenings, and exhortations to a holy life, we cannot believe

or repent till we are over-ruled by the irresistible grace of God working in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

But where now is the righteous government of the world ? Is it possible that God should exact from his creatures what he hath made them unable to perform ? That he should mock them by his promises, and hold out rewards to their obedience when they can never obey ? And let me ask, if we have not the power of doing good, have we the power of doing evil ? But this power cannot be without the other. To be guilty of sin, implies the power of not committing it. To chuse the evil is to refuse the good. Whatever we do from necessity and not from choice, cannot properly be called our doing, and certainly can neither be morally good nor evil. Is not this then to charge God foolishly, and to make him the author of sin ? Will not the worst of sinners upon this principle have a ready excuse at hand—*It is he that hath made us and not we*

we ourselves : Why then doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will ? But is it then true, that our nature is thus totally corrupt, that we have no principle of virtue, or good tendency left within us ? Is the love of God and our neighbour unnatural to the mind of man ? Is it human nature to be inhuman, that is, unkind and cruel to our neighbours ? Is it a crime, as the apostle supposes, to be without natural affection, and yet are all our natural affections criminal ? Is it the common sentiment of mankind to abhor that which is good ? Are we not, on the contrary, made to reverence virtue and piety wherever we see them, and to detest and abhor the more flagrant characters of vice and impiety ? Is not this principle in some degree seen even in bad men ? And does not every man's conscience, when it reproves him for sin, proclaim aloud in his ear that it was in his power to avoid it ? If this doctrine be true, there is an end of all virtue and morality, of all reason and religion at once.

The depravity of mankind, and their natural propensity to evil, will be readily acknowledged ; that we are drawn aside of our own lusts and enticed ; that the flesh lusteth against the spirit ; and that there is a law in our members warring against the law of our minds, and bringing us into captivity to the law of sin : These difficulties God hath thought necessary to exercise our faith and prove our virtue. But the scripture assures us, that we may walk after the spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh ; that in this case, sin shall not have the dominion over us ; that if we resist the devil he will flee from us ; that even without the law, men might by nature do the things contained in the law ; that under the law many persons wrought righteousness *, and, as we may suppose, like Zecharias and his wife Elizabeth, walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the lord blameless †. The scriptures of the old testament were, as we are taught in the new, || profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God might

* Heb. xi. 33. † Luke i. 6. || 2 Tim. iii. 16.

be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. How much more then is the grace of the gospel sufficient for us? How much more is the faithful christian able to do all things through Christ that strengtheneth him § ? The scriptures throughout apply to us, as men capable of deliberation and choice. They sometimes expressly assert this power, and always suppose it as strongly as if it were expressed. *Behold I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse. I have set before thee life and good, death and evil.* And again, *I call heaven and earth to witness this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing, therefore chuse life †.* So that the sense of the whole may be expressed in the words of the son of Sirach. *God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hands of his counsel: if thou wilt to keep the commandments and to perform acceptable faithfulness. He hath set fire and water before thee, stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and*

§ Phil. iv. 13. † Deut. xii. 26, 30, 15, 19.

death, and whether him liketh shall be given him ‡.

But the consequences of this doctrine are so far from discouraging the abettors of it, that they have only led them to extend their system yet farther. It is natural to ask, if men are universally incapable of doing righteousness, and without righteousness or holiness no man shall see the Lord, who then shall be saved? To this and the other difficulties mentioned, their answer is, that to those whom God hath decreed to save, and whom he hath ~~at~~ his own mere will and pleasure, not for any good dispositions of their own, elected from the rest of mankind, he will impart his grace, convincing them of sin, and of the infinite guilt they lie under ; of their own inability to do any thing that is good ; of their consequent need of a redeemer, not only of infinite dignity to atone for their sins, but who must in his own person suffer the punishment due for them, and

‡ Ecclus. xv. 14.

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in his own person fulfill the law in their stead ; that God will then infuse his saving faith into their hearts, from which time they have the witness of the spirit within them, that the righteousness of Christ is become their righteousness, that they are not only justified or pardoned, but saved, enrolled in the number of God's elect, from which state of grace they cannot finally fall.

Here now is an easy way to salvation ~~to~~ ^{if} they ~~themselves~~ can bring themselves to believe it, which indeed seems not so easy, for the worst of sinners. It is indeed the worst of sinners, who by this account are nearest to the grace of God, and most likely to be of the number of his elect. If the best of men are not sensible that they are as bad as the worst ; if instead of thanking God for the means of grace which they enjoy, for the helps and advantages which he hath vouchsafed them towards a holy and godly life, for the benefits of his word and sacraments, for giving them all things pertaining to life and

and godliness ; if instead of endeavouring to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of all that is good, they are not convinced that all this grace hath been bestowed upon them in vain ; if they are not convinced that all their endeavours thus assisted will be lost and can have no tendency to recommend them to God's favour ; if they cannot believe that the guilt or righteousness of one may become the personal guilt or righteousness of another ; however they may believe the gospel and all the doctrines which they think delivered in it ; however sincere they may be in their endeavours, and however earnest in their prayers that they may understand the scriptures aright ; however they may disclaim all merit in themselves, and rest the hopes of their acceptance on the merits of Christ ; they are yet far from the kingdom of God.

Thus the mercies of God are arrogated to themselves, by a few persons who presume to deal out with an unsparing hand, the judgments of heaven against others ; and yet charge with pride and pre-

presumption the humble believer, whose faith only leads him to hope, with the poor publican, that God will be merciful to him a sinner, and that his imperfect endeavours to serve him will be accepted; and his failures pardoned through the merits of Christ.

Not content with robbing the righteous of all his hopes, and turning the virtues of the best men into sin, they have added yet this above all, to entail the guilt of Adam's sin upon all his posterity, thus consigning all without distinction, young and old, infant and suckling; to the punishments of the next world, for no other crime but that of being born in this. It could not be expected, that the scriptures should warn us against a doctrine so unlikely ever to be thought of as this. A thousand volumes might have been written by the apostles, without their suspecting that an opinion like this could be conceived by man. But happily reason and justice do not more strongly reclaim against these hard sayings than the scriptures themselves : which

which uniformly teach us, that God would have all men to be saved * ; that Christ died for all § ; that God bath no pleasure in him that dieth, but had rather that he should return and live † ; that if he bath concluded all under sin, it is that he might have mercy upon all ‡. They no where speak of the imputed righteousness of Christ, or suppose the guilt of Adam's sin to be imputed to his posterity, which cannot be believed without confounding all our ideas of justice and equity, of innocence and guilt. It is indeed once said by St. Paul, that *as by the disobedience of one, many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous* ||, which is almost the only passage of scripture that gives countenance to this doctrine. But the meaning of this, as I have formerly explained to you at large, is only that as by the first man's disobedience all men became mortal, were involved in the sentence of death pronounced upon Adam ; so by the obedience of Christ,

* 1 Tim. ii. 4. § 2 Cor. i. 14. † Ez. xviii. 23, 32.
‡ Rom. xi. 32. || Rom. v. 19.

the weight of this sentence is removed, all are restored to life again, and to the hopes of a happy immortality. *As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive* *. This is sufficiently explained in the verses preceding. *As by one man's offence death reigned—all are dead—judgment came upon all men to condemnation ; so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men to justification of life* †. And happily the case of imputed guilt is expressly and largely stated in one of the prophets, and thus decided with a severe rebuke on those who charged the ways of God with being thus unequal. *The soul that sinneth it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him* §.

I would not be thought to be here censoring and condemning all who embrace or propagate these doctrines. Far be it from

* 1 Cor. xv. 20. † Rom. v. 17, 18, 19. § Ezek. xviii. 20—32.

me. We see many among them eminent for their piety and virtue, and who we doubt not will be saved for their works sake, whose lives are indeed a reproach to many of those who too freely deride their opinions. And it is perhaps owing much to our own fault, that these opinions have so far prevailed among us.

The open neglect of piety and christian worship, and of the public exercises of religion, among those whose example carries weight and authority with it, hath infected, as is natural, the lower classes of men; and hence they who most want to learn, deprive themselves of the only opportunities of learning; a consequence of which is, that a general ignorance of the first principles of religion is attended with a general profligacy of manners. Dissipation of mind and inattention to all things serious, and, of consequence, a want of all religious principle, is the prevailing character of the age. And, perhaps, discouraged by these appearances, and by the little success and the little countenance their labours meet

meet with, they whose office it is to call men to repentance, instead of increasing their efforts, have been more slack and remiss in their duty than they ought. In this state of things, men of serious minds, alarmed with the overflowings of ungodliness, may, with the best intentions, have attempted to awaken a sense of religion in the careless and inconsiderate, but for want of judging rightly about the true causes of this corruption, for want of a due knowledge of the scriptures, or of the proper qualifications for interpreting them, from conversing with books of mystical piety, and the writings of those who had but lately emerged from the darkness of popery, and were still wandering in the mazes of school divinity *, and who

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* It can scarce I think be denied that the writings of many of our first reformers, and even the articles of the church, in their most obvious meaning, give too much countenance to some of the doctrines here controverted. These have indeed been interpreted in a different sense, by writers of the first authority in the church. This latitude of construction seems to have been claimed and allowed from the beginning. It has been defended by almost all who have written professedly

were therefore in many instances bad interpreters of the scriptures; they have surely erred from the right way through a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, adopting opinions long since exploded, and deforming religion with doctrines highly injurious to the honour of God, and subversive of all the principles of morality.

upon them ; and they have certainly for more than a century past, been generally interpreted, and that openly and avowedly, and therefore, I hope honestly, with this latitude. But it is still pain and grief to ingenuous minds to subscribe to forms, which in their first appearance they cannot approve. I must therefore earnestly join with those who wish to see the ministers of our church relieved from this burden ; from which, though bound by the same law, and formerly attached, at least as firmly by prejudice to the rigid interpretation, the ministers of our dissenting churches have found a way, and are, I am informed, very generally allowed by their congregations, as well as by the magistrate, to exempt themselves. That there have been, and may still subsist, many difficulties in the way of attempting this alteration in our national church ; every thinking and candid person will allow. And therefore, till this can be done, it seems a duty in all to forbear complaining of their superiors, and to judge charitably of those, who, in subscribing the same forms, assume a liberty of differing from them in the manner of interpretation ; and for which license they may now surely plead the tacit consent and allowance both of the church and state.

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The mischiefs to be apprehended from the prevalence of these opinions are great and obvious. They expose religion to the contempt of rational men, and to the scoffs of the profane and impious, who will be glad to conclude that to be religious is to be visionary, and that piety and devotion but ill accord with reason and good sense. By decrying the use and necessity of good works, making the obedience of Christ stand for the obedience of Christians, and placing religion in faith and opinion, they relax the obligations of duty, flatter the sinner with false hopes of pardon without reforming and amending his life, put a mask into the hands of hypocrisy, and open a door to licentiousness. By denying the power of choice and freedom of will to men, they help them to an excuse for the worst of crimes, and make God, as I said, the author of sin. By ascribing all that is good in man, to the over-ruling and irresistible power of God, they destroy the possibility of virtue, the idea of a state of trial and probation, and of the justice of

of God in distributing rewards and punishments.

Let us then be content with the plain practical way to happiness and salvation, which reason and conscience, in concurrence with the law and the gospel, have ever prescribed ; which is, by fearing God and keeping his commandments, by conforming our lives to the rules and precepts of the gospel, by being *holy in all manner of conversation and godliness*, using thankfully and religiously all the means of grace we enjoy, humbling ourselves under a sense of our unworthiness, and of the many failings and imperfections in our best services, imploring the grace of God's holy spirit to assist and sanctify our endeavours, and relying at last on the merits of Christ for acceptance, *through whom we have received the atonement, and wait in hope of eternal life.*

In trying the spirits or judging of doctrines, which pretend to derive from heaven, let us consult the sentiments of na-

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ture and the first dictates of conscience, which God hath written in our hearts, and therefore cannot deceive us. In interpreting scripture, let us take these and the light of reason along with us, and allow no constructions of them that are not consonant to these, and to the first principles of the oracles of God. Let us admit no doctrine for divine, that is not consistent with the moral character of God, and the honour of all his attributes, his goodness, justice, mercy, and truth. Whatever doctrines coincide with these, and with the plain precepts of the gospel ; whatever doctrines give weight to the eternal laws of morality, to righteousness, temperance, and universal charity, lead us to love God and goodness, and to do the will of our father which is in heaven ; these we may admit for true; they speak the language, and breathe the spirit of the gospel. On the contrary, whatever doctrines dispense with the practice, or may be applied to evade the force of the gospel precepts ; whatever doctrines loosen the obligations of duty, speak peace to the sinner, or flatter him

him in his sins, these cannot be of God; or of Christ, and are carefully to be avoided as dangerous snares to our consciences. Let us ever interpret the more difficult passages of scripture by those that are clear and evident, remembering that what is necessary to all, must be level to the capacities of all. Let us not wrest these into articles of faith, or with this obscure light in our hands, presume to enter into the counsels and decrees of providence and matters of speculation which are too high for us. *The secret things belong unto the Lord our God, but the things which are revealed, which are laid open to every understanding, these are the things which belong unto us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law* †. The mysteries of religion, as far as they are revealed to us in the gospel, the doctrine of redemption, and the great salvation wrought for us by Jesus Christ, are mysteries of godliness, are designed to raise our ideas of the divine goodness and mercy, to excite our love and gratitude, and to engage all the generous affections

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¶ Deut. xxix. 29.

of the heart in his service ; to give us a due sense of our high calling in Christ Jesus, of the dignity and honours belonging to our christian profession, and of that eminence in piety and virtue which they require from us. These therefore we should contemplate with reverence, and give them their due influence on our minds till *the love of God rule in our hearts, and the love of Christ constrain us to all holy obedience, and to abound in every good word and work.* When our faith is thus made perfect in holiness, when it has spiritualized our affections, and raised them from the things on earth to things above, when it has captivated every thought into obedience, and made us stedfast and immovable in the work of the Lord, we may then hope to be accepted in the beloved, and through his merits to be received as good and faithful servants into the joy of our Lord. But till this good work is wrought or begun in us, *our faith is vain, we are yet in our sins.* Our faith in Christ, instead of justifying us, will aggravate our guilt, and increase our condemnation. In

a word, let us imitate the life before we presume to trust in the merits of Christ, and bear ever in our minds that caution of the Apostle : *Little children let no man deceive you ; be that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he who fulfilled all righteousness is righteous†.*

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† 1 John iii. 7, *the man that doeth sin is of the devil, because the devil sinneth from of old ; for the devil dwelleth in the world, and dwelleth in the wicked, he abideth not in the righteous, because he cannot abide him : for all that do evil hate me, because I testify of their works.*

ERRATA.

Page 16, l. 2 of Note, for *unexceptionable*, read *exceptionable*. p. 21, l. ult. for *any works*, read *any previous works*.